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ABSTRACT

The inadequate preparation of urban teachers contributes to the high rate of teacher attrition in city schools. This paper describes an attempt to alleviate the rapid turnover of urban teachers through a project that helped secondary urban student teachers become effective. In the spring semester of 1993, a teacher educator, an Urban Practicum Advisor (UPA), led seminars and worked with one male and six female student teachers. The UPA was a consultant and support person and served as an adjunct to each student teaching triad of student teacher, secondary school, and school of education. Seminars throughout the semester focused on classroom management techniques. Cooperating teachers found these student teachers to be effective classroom managers, and student teachers appreciated the work of the UPA and found the program helpful. Students also appreciated that their relationships with the UPA were volitional and free of organizational demands for evaluation or supervision. All participants felt that the UPA provided a wider variety of methods and techniques for dealing with issues of urban classroom management than did their college supervisors. (SLD)

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An Innovative Strategy for Support of Student Teachers in Secondary Urban Schools: A Description of an Exploratory Project

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An Innovative Strategy for Support of Student Teachers in Secondary Urban Schools: A Description of an Exploratory Project

Most of the urban teacher education programs which existed during the past thirty years are defunct. Even those considered very successful no longer exist. Because of the demise of urban teacher training programs, current teacher education programs now serve as a preparation for urban teachers. However, according to the Association of Teacher Educators, these generic programs are inadequate as a preparation for urban teachers (Buttery, Haberman, & Houston, 1990). Martin Haberman considers them a waste of time (1987).

According to Haberman (1987), the average career of an urban teacher is between three and five years and in every five year period, approximately one-half of the urban teaching force leaves the profession. As a result, there is a teacher shortage in the nation's 120 largest urban school districts (Haberman, 1987). The lack of specific urban teacher education programs and the inadequacy of current teacher education programs as a preparation for urban teachers have contributed to this high rate of urban teacher attrition. This paper describes one attempt to alleviate this situation.

Partly because of an urban teacher shortage, most vacancies exit in large urban school districts. Many newly certified teachers will begin their careers in large inner-city schools. Many of those novice teachers, who lack adequate urban teacher preparation, will be overwhelmed by the problems associated with urban teaching. Problems such as students' antagonism towards school, their lack of respect for themselves and their teachers, poor

student discipline, high rates of student absenteeism, students with poor academic skills, large classes, and shortages of books and supplies -- along with gangs, violence, drugs, and weapons, can be traumatic for middle-class teachers who have had no experience with or preparation for working with poor inner-city teenagers.

Because secondary urban schools usually operate within large bureaucracies which often create impersonal environments, teachers often face these problems alone. The lack of specialized urban teacher training, combined with a feeling of abandonment, can be a formula for failure.

Urban teacher failure and an urban teacher shortage will probably continue until alternative ways of preparing teachers for urban schools are found (and improved means of supporting their work are devised). This paper describes a unique project which helped secondary urban student teachers, who lacked any formal urban teacher training, survive their urban experiences and, at least, begin the process of becoming effective secondary urban classroom teachers.

Methodology

During the spring semester (January through May) of 1993, a teacher educator, known as an Urban Practicum Advisor (UPA), (Matus, 1992), led a seminar and worked individually with one male and six female student teachers. The UPA had current research-based knowledge in the areas of urban teacher education and secondary urban classroom management, along with recent secondary urban classroom experience.

The student teachers, who were enrolled in regular secondary teacher education programs in three institutions of higher learning in the Northeast, taught at six different secondary public schools in three urban school districts, and in one private urban high school in a metropolitan area in the Northeast. None of the student teachers had formal urban teacher education in their college or university teacher education programs. The student teachers either requested an urban placement or were involuntarily placed in urban schools. They received no academic credit for their participation in this study, and all were recruited as volunteers.

Throughout the semester the UPA served as an educational consultant and personal support person, helping the novice teachers clarify problems and identify solutions associated with teaching in large inner-city secondary schools. The UPA did not dictate classroom methods and strategies or evaluate the student teachers. The UPA's goal was to help participants experience enough success in their urban practica to consider subsequent careers in urban schools.

During the semester, the UPA served as an adjunct to each student teaching triad, but was not a part of it. By eliminating the UPA from the usual triad, it eliminated feelings of obligation (or apprehension) that student teachers might have toward the UPA as another authority figure. The UPA represented neither the public schools in which the participants taught, nor their college or university teacher education programs. The UPA had no part in the student teachers' evaluations. During the semester, the UPA made no attempt to establish relationships with either

the cooperating teachers or the college/university supervisors. The UPA did not observe the student teachers and all contact with them was outside the classroom. The UPA's only allegiance was to the participants.

Five seminar meetings led by the UPA were held during the third, fifth, seventh, tenth, and thirteenth weeks of the semester. Meetings were held after school in two of the public high schools in which participants taught. In weeks when the seminar did not meet, the UPA met individually with each student teacher at pre-arranged times and in pre-arranged locations for a total of five meetings per participant.

Seminars focused on the benefits of effective classroom management strategies to both the teacher and the students. Using techniques such as discussion, role playing, writing, video taping, and peer teaching, the student teachers learned to create orderly classroom environments which maximized teaching and learning opportunities for themselves and their students. Participants learned how effective classroom management strategies can improve their students' self-esteem by helping them find academic and social success while helping teachers control their classrooms. Because the student teachers taught in several different subjects areas, the seminar did not focus on specific content, thereby allowing all of the student teachers to benefit from participation.

Individual meetings continued the work of the seminar and provided an opportunity for each student teacher to share with the UPA any private concerns. By meeting individually, the

student teacher and the UPA were able to discuss personal situations or issues that might not have been applicable to the other seminar members.

Data Collection and Results

In addition to field notes maintained by the investigator for all seminar and individual meetings, at the end of the semester additional data were collected from the cooperating teachers with regard to the classroom management skills of their student teachers, and from the student teachers with regard to the work of the UPA in helping them develop and master those skills. This information was collected through the use of questionnaires and the recording of anecdotal evidence provided by the respondents.

Using other student teachers with whom they have worked in the past as a basis of comparison, cooperating teachers were asked to judge the effectiveness of their student teachers by completing a 30-item Likert questionnaire. Student teachers' attitudes toward the use of a UPA to help them become effective secondary urban classroom managers were measured using a 25-item Likert questionnaire. Opportunities were made available on both questionnaires for respondents to add anecdotal evidence to further indicate the effectiveness of student teachers' classroom management skills and the effectiveness of the UPA.

Cooperating Teacher Responses. Cooperating teacher responses indicated that their student teachers were effective classroom managers. Student teachers were judged to be effective in building relationships with their students, building their students' self-esteem, and in motivating their students during classroom

instruction. The participants showed an interest in and a sensitivity to their students' needs and generally cared about them.

Student Teacher Responses. Student teacher responses to the efforts of the UPA in helping them become effective urban classroom teachers also was positive. Student teachers felt that the training they received during the semester was necessary to their success as urban student teachers. Not only did the UPA provide the student teachers with support through seminar and individual meetings, but the UPA also taught them effective classroom management strategies which their teacher education programs had failed to do.

Anecdotal responses indicated that each student teacher benefited differently from the support she received during the semester. For some, the seminar meetings were opportunities to vent their frustrations, while others used the seminars to share their experiences with others and to learn new classroom management and instructional techniques. Many found solutions to problems from other members of the seminar. The student teachers realized that their classroom experiences were not unique, and all agreed that the information received in the seminar was helpful. They regretted, however, that it had not been a part of their regular pre-service teacher education programs.

The literature on effective secondary urban classroom management proved to be extremely helpful. Student teachers described the literature as "varied," "up-to-date," and "applicable" to their individual situations. One participant said the "readings were fantastic." Some of the student teachers indicated

that they were able to make immediate and effective use of the strategies in their classrooms.

In addition to the research-based knowledge provided by the UPA, the participants indicated that the UPA's practical experiences as a secondary urban classroom teacher was invaluable in helping them find success in their classrooms. Participants indicated that the UPA offered, "great advice that nobody else did." The UPA had "a bag of tricks ... which gave me practical ideas on management."

Finally, all student teachers indicated that they were happy to work with a professional who was not part of their triads, who had no authority over them, and who did not evaluate them. The student teachers considered the UPA as a knowledgeable friend who supported them in their efforts to have successful student teaching experiences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Cooperating teachers indicated that during the course of the semester their student teachers made solid progress toward becoming effective classroom teachers. The students teachers themselves felt that their success was directly and positively influenced by their work with the UPA. Not only did these student teachers quickly come to acknowledge that special classroom management skills are needed to be effective urban teachers, but over the course of the semester they increasingly resented the fact that they had not received this training during the on-campus phase of their pre-service programs. Combining those results with the observations of the investigator during the

study strongly supports the need for an urban focus in teacher education.

While the participants in this project needed and wanted the training they received from the UPA, they also appreciated the fact that they were not evaluated by the UPA. The positive effects the UPA had on the student teachers was based partly on the fact that the UPA's relationship with the student teachers was both volitional and free of organizational demands. The UPA was viewed as a friend or confidant rather than as a superior. The student teachers did not fear being judged for not knowing solutions or not being able to handle a problem.

Simply making the UPA an agent of the teacher education program, would compromise the integrity of the UPA. If the role of the UPA became confused with that of the instructor of preservice teacher education courses, or that of the supervisor of student teachers, independence would be lost. As a supervisor, the UPA would be responsible for evaluating the student teachers and would no longer be free of the institutional values which cooperating teachers and college supervisors bring to the student teaching triad.

Finally, out of necessity the UPA would also form relationships with cooperating teachers and other college/university supervisors, thereby dividing the UPA's loyalties between the student teachers and the participating institutions. Whatever structural arrangements might be designed, if the unique qualities of this project are to be preserved, I am convinced that in

future triads, it will be important to separate the work of the UPA from regular teacher education programs.

The participants in this project regretted that they had not been exposed to the issues of urban classroom management prior to student teaching. Though the UPA had met with each participant, described the project in detail, and conducted an initial interview, the UPA did not begin working with the participants on effective urban classroom management strategies until after they had been in their clinical sites for three weeks.

One solution to the problems produced by this situation, would be to recruit teacher educators who, like the UPA, had both the appropriate research-based background and the practical experience in both urban teacher education and urban secondary schools. Having such on-campus teacher educators would allow pre-service teachers to be exposed to the issues of urban teaching before they began the practicum and would allow them to receive appropriate individual support after student teaching began.

As successful as it may have been, the UPA constituted an "add-on" to pre-service preparation, and suffered the limitations of any such effort. Though the participants in this project indicated that they benefited from the support and specialized assistance they received from the UPA, most felt that they didn't have time for any more obligations than student teaching itself. A few felt overburdened by the after-school seminar meetings. From their vantage point, because student teaching was a full-

time job, they did not have the time or the energy to attend any kind of after-school activity -- no matter how well-intended.

In place of an after-school seminar, a support group which met during the school day when student teachers are released from their teaching duties, could replace the usual institutional seminar -- if student teachers had received intensive urban training in on-campus courses and in early field experiences prior to student teaching. This would alleviate the burden of additional after-school meetings.

Other Results

An unexpected but very interesting outcome of this project was the contrast it provided between the work of the UPA and the concurrent efforts of the college supervisors. All seven participants felt that the UPA offered then a wider variety of methods and techniques for dealing with issues of urban classroom management than did their supervisors. Five of the seven felt more comfortable discussing issues of urban classroom management with the UPA than with their supervisors. One of the participants indicated that she "had no relationship with my supervisor," while another said her "supervisor did nothing."

Relationships such as those have serious implications for the viability of the student teaching triad. Perhaps the role of the college/university supervisors could be reassessed and effort given to devising ways to make that role more influential. Providing supervisors with special training for work in urban settings would be one obvious strategy for improving their contributions to the growth of student teachers.

In conclusion, not only is an urban teacher education focus needed as part of regular pre-service teacher education programs, but absent changes in the present model for supervision, urban student teachers will continue to need the help and guidance of a personal advisor during student teaching.

Footnotes

In 1992, I learned through telephone conversations with teacher educators associated with formal urban teacher education programs, that urban teacher education programs were, for the most part, defunct.

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